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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LIBREVILLE 000195

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [GB](#) [ASEC](#)

SUBJECT: GABON: PRESIDENT BONGO, SERIOUSLY ILL, "SUSPENDS"
ACTIVITIES

REF: LIBREVILLE 0179

Classified By: DCM Nathan Holt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Gabonese President El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba, who we believe was hospitalized on May 4, was discharged on the night of May 6-7 but remains gravely ill, according to well-informed medical sources. Informed speculation is that the president may be suffering from some form of cancer, complicating pre-existing diabetes. Hours before he was discharged, a presidential spokesman announced that Bongo had temporarily "suspended" his activities. The statement cited the president's need for rest and recuperation following the March 14 death of his wife Edith. Bongo has made no public appearance in over a month. He has ruled Gabon since 1967 and is the world's longest-serving elected president. End Summary.

President Hospitalized

¶2. (C) Bongo was hospitalized on an emergency basis at a private Libreville clinic on May 4, according to sources at the clinic. While at the clinic, he apparently received radiological treatments consistent with treatment for some form of cancer. The president was also given analgesics for pain relief. The director of the clinic's intensive care unit (ICU) was called in to assist Bongo's private medical team during the most recent hospitalization, the first time ICU services have been required. Bongo's most recent hospitalizations at the same clinic have apparently not been on an emergency basis (Reftel).

¶3. (C) Bongo was discharged on the night of May 6-7, according to medical sources. The same sources assert that there is ongoing evaluation of whether the president should be flown out of the country for additional medical care. Separately, sources close to the presidency confirm that the president is gravely ill, and that his condition has taken a significant turn for the worse in recent days. In the few public photographs of the president that have been published in the government press over the last month, he appears noticeably frailer and thinner.

Suspension of Activities

¶4. (C) The government's spokesman appeared on Gabonese television May 6 to announce that Bongo has temporarily "suspended" his normal activities, and that all presidential audiences had been suspended until further notice. Earlier in the day, a source at the presidency said told us Bongo would be unavailable for meetings for at least two weeks.

15. (C) The statement made no mention of Bongo's illness, which has never been publicly acknowledged. The president had been gravely affected by the March 14 death of his wife Edith Lucie Bongo Ondimba, the statement explained, and needed time to "regain strength and rest." Bongo had resumed his presidential duties after his wife's death, the statement noted, but in response to the pressing demands of his family and others, Bongo should now be given time to observe the traditional and longer period of mourning prescribed by Gabonese custom.

Who's in Charge?

16. (U) Vice-President Didjob Divungi Di Ndinge will step into the president's role during this period of "suspension". In that capacity, Divungi was scheduled to preside over a weekly council of ministers meeting May 7 before a flying to Pretoria to attend the inauguration of South African President Jacob Zuma. Bongo has missed at least the last three council of ministers meetings and has not appeared in public since April 7. The traditional Worker's Day parade on May 1 was cancelled, ostensibly in respect for Edith Bongo's death.

17. (U) Gabon's constitution prescribes that in the event of the president's death, the president of the Senate assumes the presidency and must organize elections within 45 days. Rose Francine Rogombe, a previously obscure politician who became president of the Senate only in February, is thought to be an ally of the president's son and Defense Minister,

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Ali Bongo Ondimba.

Family Rivalries

18. (C) Ali Bongo has over the last two years increasingly consolidated his power over the country's armed forces and sought to strengthen his position within the ruling Parti Democratique Gabonais (PDG). Most observers believe that with his apparent control over the armed forces, Ali Bongo will emerge in one way or another as the PDG's candidate in any election following the president's death, and that the PDG candidate will prevail in the election. Gabon's political opposition is weak and divided, with many of the most prominent leaders co-opted into the current government.

19. (C) Ali Bongo has acknowledged an ongoing struggle within the PDG against both old-line allies of his father (including some senior military officials who Ali has retired or sidelined), and younger rivals including Foreign Minister Paul Toungui. Toungui is the long-time consort of Ali Bongo's powerful sister Pascaline, who is also the president's chief of staff. Together Foreign Minister Toungui and Pascaline Bongo exert significant influence over the finances of both the Bongo family and the Gabonese state. Foreign Minister Toungui specifically served as finance minister from 2002 to 2008 and is said to retain considerable influence over government spending.

110. (C) Several of Ali Bongo's recent actions appear to target Toungui. Many were surprised April 21 when Ali Bongo ordered elite troops to set up roadblocks at key points in Libreville to inspect vehicles and identify those which had been misappropriated for personal use. Ali Bongo, who acknowledged to the Ambassador that he had ordered the crackdown, later stated publicly that he had identified about 300 misappropriated vehicles, many from the "financial ministries." Ali Bongo has also complained in recent months that both the National Assembly and the Ministry of Finance have failed to provide adequate funding for the defense forces. It is unclear whether Ali Bongo's action was

coordinated with the office of Prime Minister Jean Eyeghe Ndong, or why the police or gendarmerie were not utilized for what was essentially a police operation.

¶11. (C) In a rare public interview following the crackdown, Ali Bongo warned that there could be other, similar security operations in the future. He also defended himself against charges that he is a Nigerian orphan from the Biafran war adopted by his parents in the mid-1960s. More strangely still, Ali Bongo's mother Patience Dabany, a prominent Gabonese singer and former wife of President Bongo, also appeared on television with photos of the young Ali Bongo and a stout, detailed explanation of the circumstances of his natural birth in 1959 in French-ruled Brazzaville.

French Court Case

¶12. (U) Further adding to the woes of the beleaguered president, a French court announced this week that it would investigate the merit of complaints by Transparency International and other litigants against Bongo and two other heads of state: Denis Sassou-Nguesso of the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) and Teodoro Obiang of Equatorial Guinea. French prosecutors had earlier urged the court to drop the case. The court's action was the latest in a series of legal maneuvers by anti-corruption activists against Bongo and other heads of state in French courts. Though decidedly unwelcome, the court action was believed to have no relation to Bongo's decision to suspend his activities as president.

EAC Meeting

¶13. (C) Post's EAC met May 6 to discuss reports of the president's failing health and review emergency procedures. No change to post's current security posture was recommended, but staff were advised to remain alert and report new developments or unusual activities to post management.

Comment

¶14. (C) Anxiety is mounting in Gabon with news that President Bongo has temporarily "suspended" his activities. The longer he stays out of public view, the more these concerns will grow. One well-informed physician told us that

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if Bongo is as sick as other physicians say, it may be "days, weeks or months, but not years" before the president passes. Gabon will then face a significant test of its constitutional structures and its long record of relative political peace.
End Comment.
REDDICK